DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 439 424 CS 217 035

AUTHOR Gosselin, Colette
TITLE Emotion: An Embodied Ethic for Literacy.
PUB DATE 1998-03-00
NOTE 7p.
PUB TYPE Opinion Papers (120)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Language Role; *Literacy; Rhetoric; Translation
IDENTIFIERS Dewey (John); *Discourse; *Emotions; Habermas (Jurgen)

ABSTRACT

To construct a new ideal to define what it means to be literate, Benjamin Endres turns to Jurgen Habermas's "discourse" to offer an ethic for literacy and to examine the conditions that must be met to be in communion with the other. The acceptance of language as "the specific medium of understanding" and Habermas's choice to "ignore nonverbalized actions and bodily expressions" is disconcerting, limiting the view of what it means to be educated to the cognitive domain. The limitations of language, when disembodied from the self, resonate throughout Hester Prynne's anguish as she searches for the comforts of home. In "The Politics of Translation," Gayatri Spivak locates the task of interpretation or translation as a way to consider language as a clue to the workings of gendered agency. Spivak sees language as providing clues to knowledge that permit people to engage in the site of negotiation or the place where communication occurs. In deconstructing language, she distinguishes between its logic and rhetoric. For her, rhetoric works in the silence between and around words to see what works and how much. As a way of addressing the shortcomings of Habermas's "discourse" as an ethic for literacy, and to expand on what Spivak calls rhetoric in her politics of translation, a consideration of John Dewey's writings on feelings and emotions offers an ethic that other literacy paradigms fall short in providing. To accept a cognitive paradigm for any ethic in education destines people to be lost in the labyrinth of their minds. (NKA)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
C. Gosselin
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

ED 439 424

Emotion: An Embodied Ethic for Literacy

Colette Gosselin Rutgers University

> A tendency to speculation, though it may keep woman quiet, as it does man, yet makes her sad....As a first step, the whole of society is to be torn down, and built anew. Then, the very nature of the opposite sex, or its long hereditary habit, which has become like nature, is to be essentially modified, before woman can be allowed to assume what seems a fair and suitable position. Finally, all other difficulties being obviated, woman cannot take advantage of these preliminary reforms until she herself shall have undergone preliminary reforms, until she herself shall have undergone still mightier changes, in which the ethereal essence, wherein she has her truest life, will be found to have evaporated. A woman never overcomes these problems by any exercise of thought. They are not to be solved, or only in one way. If her heart chance to come uppermost, they vanish. Thus Hester Prynne, whose heart had lost its regular and healthy throb, wandered without a clew in the dark labyrinth of mind; now turned aside by an insurmountable precipice; now starting back from the deep chasm. There was a wild and ghastly scenery all around her, and a home and comfort nowhere.[1]

Pointing to the need to broaden our conception of what it means to be literate in modern society, Benjamin Endres contests the reductionist view of literacy as a basic ability to read and write and critiques traditional paradigms that view literacy as a catalyst for social revolution or as a means to increase material productivity or democratic participation. As a way of constructing a new ideal to define what it means to be literate,

CS 217 035

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Endres turns to Jürgen Habermas' "discourse" to offer an ethic for literacy and to examine the conditions that must be met to be in communion with the other. But as Endres points out, "discourse" depends upon settings where routine interaction is suspended so that reflective dialogue can made possible. It requires what Habermas calls the "hypothetical attitude," which is echoed by John Rawls in *A Theory of Justice*, where in the original position we step behind the "veil of ignorance," where we alienate ourselves from ourselves, where we strip ourselves of experience, erasing ourselves of categories of race, class, and gender, and make ourselves invisible in an effort "to see" ourselves through the lens of the other.[2]

The disembodiment present in both paradigms and the turn to a universal pragmatics, to an abstract "reality," and to reason to establish an ethic raises the question of what it means to be educated in modern times and ignores the contingency of the everyday that this ethic wants to inform. While we may applaud the move to understanding as a new ideal for literacy, the acceptance of language as "the specific medium of understanding" and Habermas's choice to "ignore nonverbalized actions and bodily expresssions"[3] is disconcerting, limiting our view of what it means to be educated to the cognitive domain.

The limitations of language, when it is disembodied from the self, resonate throughout Hester Prynne's anguish as she searches for the comforts of home; a home that is a felt experience in the body as feelings and emotions, meanings that words and reason oftentimes blur or cannot capture. While Habermas does not completely ignore feelings and emotion, in theory, he wants to locate validity claims in language and assumes that

the speaker can know truth and that the listener can interpret truth. But what "is" and what "appears" are two entirely different things, and we know from Aristotle's aim of investigations that we begin our deliberation to become good on appearances or what we *think* we know. Acknowledging the distinction between thinking and knowing is essential as we attempt to "interpret" and "narrate" our perspective and the perspective of the other, and such acknowledgment fosters acceptance that the construction of meaning is slippery in our contingent world.

To Gayatri Spivak, "language isn't everything. It is only a vital clue to where the self loses its boundaries."[4] In *The Politics of Translation*, Spivak locates the task of interpretation or translation as a way to consider language as a clue to the workings of gendered agency. For Spivak, meaning unfolds as the speaker's location is unbraided to reveal the inner workings that have been constructed in the historical and social moment. She sees language as providing clues to knowledge that permit us to engage in the site of negotiation or the place where communication occurs. By focusing on this interstitial space, the politics of language can serve as a means of eliminating the binary logic of Western translation, which remains stuck in a literal or figurative translation of language. In deconstructing language, Spivak distinguishes between its logic and rhetoric. To her, the logic of language allows us to jump from word to word by means of clearly indicated connections, while its rhetoric disrupts this logic and generates space for contingency. As she describes it, rhetoric works in the silence between and around words to see what works and how much. However, for Spivak, translation is never complete for the speaker or the listener, as each has her own claims to knowledge which is utilized in this

interpretation, and so the difficult task then is to bring ourselves as close as possible to the authentic experience while knowing that this map of knowledge will be continually redrawn, contested, and can never be definitive.

Still, the value is placed on reason, thought, and on the spoken word, or the tension between words in language. This preoccupation in the West with a mode of inquiry and the expression of agency and/or ideas in the form of a verbal utterance generates discomfort for this author; it is as if reason has colonized the body. While "thinking [is at times] an end in itself," Dewey reminds us that "the pangs, the travail of thought, the arduousness of reflection, the loneliness of meditation, the heaviness of deliberation, are all proverbial. "[5] Traditionally viewed as radical alternatives in Western thought, gestures, feelings, emotions, and apparent silence are subtle yet powerful and meaningful acts, which are noticeably absent from the new ideal that Endres has proposed.

While thinking of what Habermas means by the "hypothetical moment" as the moment where the possibility of understanding can be met, I ask "how could we ever know it?" and perhaps more importantly, "how could we even know misunderstanding?" through a cognitive paradigm. As a way of addressing the shortcomings of Habermas's "discourse" as an ethic for literacy, and to expand on what Spivak calls rhetoric in her politics of translation, I turn to Dewey's writings on feelings and emotions to consider an ethic that other literacy paradigms fall short in providing.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Dewey said that our "emotional reactions form the chief materials of our knowledge of ourselves and others." [6] He draws a distinction between feelings in its narrow conception as sensory stimulus, such as those that correspond to choking, suffocation, and heart palpitations, and feelings or emotions in their broadest context which have "face-to-face consciousness of worth" and are "conditioned upon the presence of an image."[7] To have worth means that we place value on feelings. Their presence is a statement of a judgment that is made and is therefore a statement of moral conduct. They inform us of habits, beliefs, and ideals formed in prior experience. Comprised of both feeling and intellect, emotions are found where there is a

> certain tension or conflict between the image and the feeling reaction....Emotion involves disturbance and agitation. Whenever there is emotion, there is a divergence between the sense situation and the image situation....a continual oscillation, a continual alternation between the image and the existing situation....The excitation, then the disturbance which is characteristic of all emotion being stirred up, is due precisely to the fact that the given situation is thrown into relief over against an ideal (*EAV*, 112).

It is this tension in the situation that alerts us to misunderstanding, or, in the absence of tension, where we recognize the appearance of understanding. Still, while feelings such as doubt, anger, or passion are powerful and immediate signifiers that bring us in tune with prior habits, Dewey tells us that feelings are not necessarily and finally trustworthy, for "things which seem to possess a negative value immediately may possess a very positive one measured in terms of final outcomes...and vice versa" (*EAV*, 111). And so "we must use intellectual processes to make up for deficiencies of this too direct valuation" (*EAV*, 111). We need our intellect to bring resolution, to transform emotion into interest, to attach feelings directly to the idea or image (*EAV*, 112). Therefore, while

we use our intellect to form new habits or undergo growth, it is in our emotions that we begin deliberation and inquiry and make the move toward understanding a possibility. It is in an ethic of emotion that we may begin to think about the conditions Habermas sees as necessary to achieve understanding.

To accept a cognitive paradigm for any ethic in education destines us to be like Hester Prynne, lost in the dark labyrinth of our minds, alienated from ourselves, forever to seek the comfort of home to serve as our guide in our search for truth.

1. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* (1850; reprint, New York: Penguin Books, 1986).

2. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971).

3. Jürgen Habermas, "What is Universal Pragmatics" in *Communication and the Evolution of Society* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1979), 1.

4. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "The Politics of Translation," in *Destabilizing Theory*, ed. Michelle Barrett and Anne Phillips (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), 177.

5. John Dewey, " The Theory of Emotion" in *John Dewey: The Early Works*, vol. 4, ed. JoAnn Boydston (Carbondale: Southern University Press. 1971), 157.

6. John Dewey, "Ethics," in *John Dewey: The Later Works*, vol. 7, ed. JoAnn Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1985).

7. John Dewey, "The Emotional Aspect of Volition," in *Lectures in Psychological and Political Ethics: 1898*, ed. Donald F. Koch (New York: Hafner Press, 1976), 111. This essay will be cited as EAV in the text for all subsequent references.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE